

On The Campaign to Protect the Middle Fork

Participant-Observer Research with Eco-Justice Collaborative

Seven years after the Vermilion Power Station closed, 3.3M cubic yards of coal ash remains in the floodplain of the Middle Fork Vermilion River, putting nearby communities and wildlife at risk. I've spent the last six months working alongside Eco-Justice Collaborative as an advocate planner and chronicling their strategy as they organized the grassroots campaign to remove it.

The lessons from this period are critical for planners and community organizers to better understand the importance and challenges of organizing a grassroots campaign for environmental justice.

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Campaign Timeline

- 2011 After 56 years, the **Vermilion Power Station** closes leaving 3.3M CY of coal ash in the floodplain of the Middle Fork Vermilion River.
- 2014 **Eco-Justice Collaborative (EJC)** begins holding key stakeholder interviews and public meetings for the campaign to protect the Middle Fork.
- 2018 June - EJC holds a **"People's Hearing"** in Danville to raise awareness of the coal ash and pressure the IEPA & Corps of Engineers to take action.
November - EJC hold a **lobby day in Springfield** in coalition with groups from around the state to release the IL Coal Ash Report & deliver public letters and a transcript of the People's Hearing to then-Governor Rauner.
- 2019 March - After intense public pressure, the **IEPA holds a public hearing** regarding proposed bank armoring. Over 300 people attend in opposition.
April - The **campaign moves to the courts** as the IL Attorney General takes up the closure suit on referral from the IEPA.

"Step by step, the longest march
Can be won, can be won
Many stones can form an arch
Singly none, singly none.
And by union what we will
Can be accomplished still
Drops of water turn a mill
Singly none, singly none."
-Pete Seeger, "Step by Step"



The Middle Fork & Communities at Risk



This stretch of the Middle Fork Vermilion is Illinois's only nationally designated Wild & Scenic River and along with Kickapoo State Park brings over 1M visitors to Vermilion County each year.

Harmful toxins such as Arsenic, Boron, and Sulfate leech from the coal ash, contaminating ground and surface waters, posing a health risk for wildlife and river users.

Despite being a critical issue for the community, the siloed regulatory process shuts out the public and prevents agencies from evaluating the issue holistically.

Clean Water Certification Public Hearing Danville, IL, March 26, 2019

After years of intense public pressure, the IEPA agreed to hold a public hearing on Dynegy's proposal to bury the riverbank in over 22,000 CY of stone to slow the natural migration of the channel and allow the coal ash to remain in place.



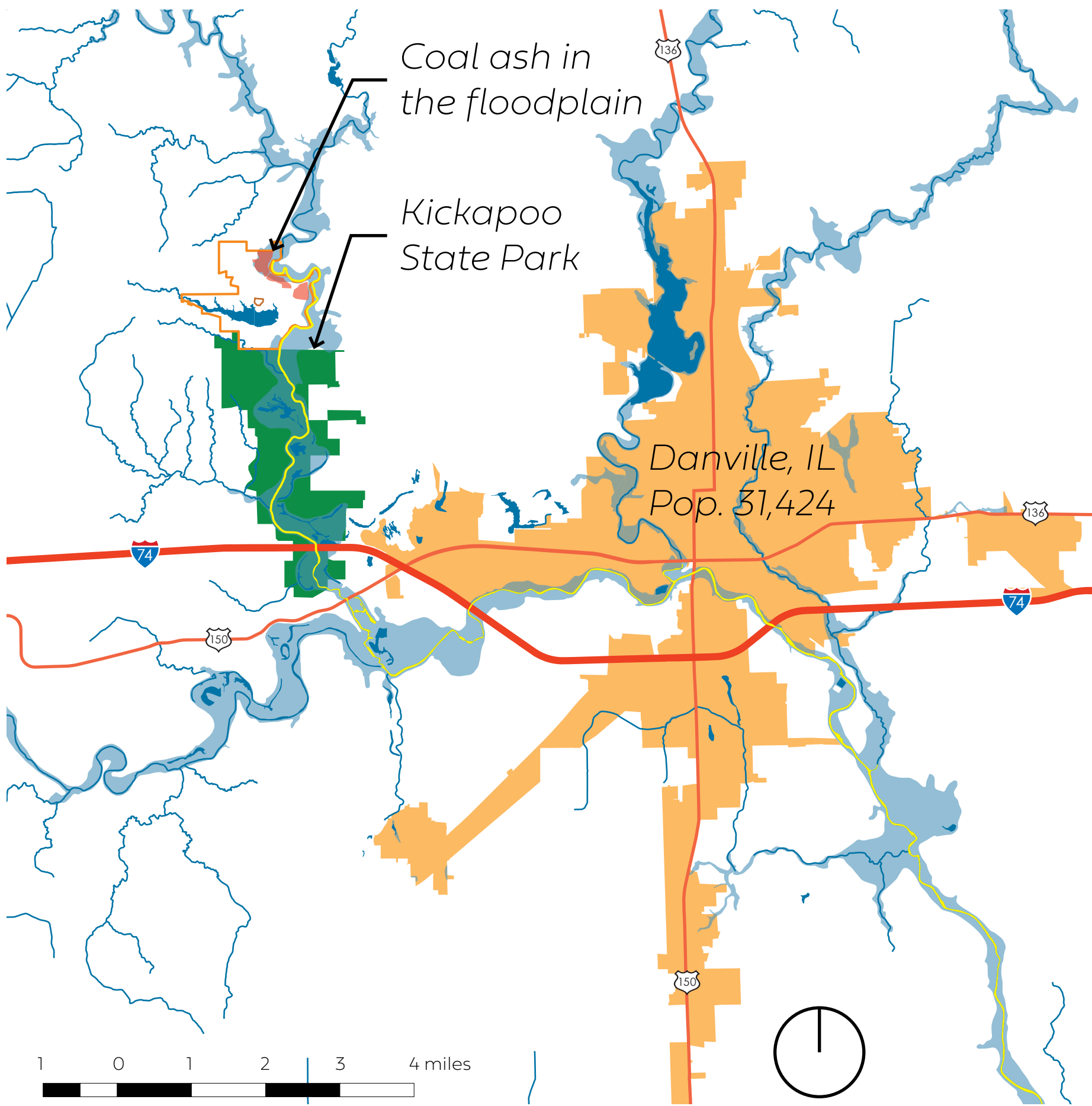
To prepare for the hearing, EJC held briefings in Danville & Urbana to inform residents about the hearing process and answer any questions they may have.



EJC & others held a rally outside before the hearing which included chants of "Dynegy, move your ash!" and singing of old union songs.



Over 300 citizens attended the hearing included medical and engineering professionals. Not a single person spoke in favor of Dynegy's proposal.



4 Takeaways for Planners & Advocates

1. Grassroots mobilization can take years to develop but is critical for earning political support & forcing regulators to take action.
2. Clear actionable goals help community members take ownership and stay invested over the course of a long campaign.
3. Earning trust is key to establishing relationships in the community & with regulators. Honesty creates allies.
4. Working in coalition allows organizations to raise the profile of their campaign & connect local issues with larger movements.

